

The Mangle of Play

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In this essay, I discuss the ways in which, in the context of Lineage, the game that's actually played by participants is not the game that designers originally had in mind, but rather one that is the outcome of an interactively stabilized (Pickering, 1995) "mangle of practice" of designers, players, in-game currency farmers, and broader social norms.

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I study cognition, coming from the general perspective that it is a socially and materially distributed phenomenon located not merely within the head but also, and perhaps more crucially, across systems of activity in communities of practice. I look at the intellectual work/play that people engage in with tools, artifacts, contexts, and other people. Massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) are particularly interesting to me because I find the forms of cognition that they recruit illuminating comparisons to the sort often valued beyond them—in schools, contemporary workplaces, disciplinary domains such as science, and so on. I studied Lineage (both I and II) and now World of Warcraft. And, for nearly 4 years now, I have led clans made up of a sundry assortment of gamer "types." I've written on various aspects of MMOGameplay such as the ways MMOGs are used as third spaces for informal sociability (Steinkuehler, 2005), the ways everyday in-game talk indices shared community values and forms of identity they make available (Steinkuehler, in press), forms of apprenticeship through which in-game communities reproduce themselves (Steinkuehler, 2004), and so on. My dissertation—a 2-year online ethnography of Lineage I/II—was a broadstroke attempt to lay the foundations for my own line of academic research in game studies from a cognitive perspective. Stated bluntly, my goal was to characterize the broad intellectual life of MMOGameplay so I might then do more systematic, cognitively oriented research, theory, and design work based on an accurate understanding of what activity is really all about. I have much work still ahead of me, and game rules, be they legal ones represented in end user license agreements (EULAs) or designed ones represented by the underlying code, are largely beyond the purview of what I know and understand best. That they shape the kind of fandom communities and activities I research, however, goes without question. So, with that disclaimer in mind, I'd like to explore this point of intersection in a bit more depth.

In this essay, I'd like to unpack a bit the community norms and shared patterns of behavior that emerge as a result of an intersection between game design, economic reality, law, and play. Often, when I talk about emergent culture with game designers, the discussion quickly gravitates toward possible technical solutions (or their infeasibility) to the problems of (what many of us perceive as) impoverished forms of play. Take, for example, an earlier *Terra Nova* discussion entitled "The Better Mousetrap" (Burke, 2004), in which the one-to-one relationship "time = reward," characteristic of so many MMOG designs, is problematized. In a nutshell, the issue under consideration is whether there might be viable alternative metrics for success within game spaces that might foster more varied and creative forms of play. We are all familiar with the "grind" associated with many MMOG titles and the fact that casual gamers, who have less time to invest in leveling an online character, are often left utterly unable to compete.

Often, what I find missing from such conversations is a robust account of the ways in which in-game communal norms amplify, enhance, negate, accommodate, complement, and at times even ignore hard-coded game rules. It's not that designers, EULA writers, and the like are somehow unaware of the fact that the game worlds they create are often inhabited in ways that are underdetermined by the designed game rules and regulations (or, at least, not predictable from such rules in a necessarily straightforward way). Truth be told, more than any other group of professionals, game designers and regulators are all too aware of the precocious unpredictability of how their designs and rules will be taken up by the groups they are intended to regulate. Rather, I see the palpable absence of discussion of the regulatory nature of game culture that tends to characterize discussions of regulation by design as a result of the simple fact that technical solutions are far more tractable topics than sociotechnical ones.¹ When you do social science, as I do, you are faced with the sticky problem that people are difficult to model mathematically and accurately predict (although the fact that their activities *can* be modeled, predicted, and to some extent, engineered is exactly what fields like mine are historically all about). Social norms are messy. But, then, because of them, game design (and their legal regulation) is pretty messy as well.

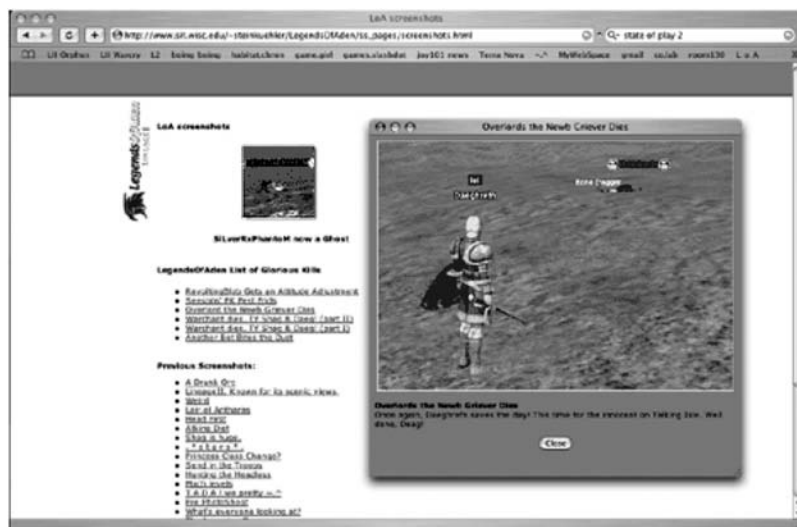
Still, games are designed experiences and, as such, their study requires understanding not just the formal rule systems designed into them but also the full range of human practices through which players actively inhabit their worlds and render them meaningful. Games are a "mangle" (Pickering, 1995) of production and consumption—of human intentions (with designers and players in conversation with one another; Robison, 2005), material constraints and affordances, evolving sociocultural practices, and brute chance. In this essay, I discuss the ways in which, in the context of *Lineage*, the game that's actually played by participants is not the game designers originally had in mind but rather one that is the outcome of an interactively stabilized (Pickering, 1995) "mangle of practice" of designers, players, in-game currency farmers, and broader social norms.

Interactively Stabilized Game Balance

But let me get more to my point, starting first with a small example of how emergent game culture intersects with game rules to create game balance in ways that the design alone was unable. Lineage (both I and II) is a siege-based, player-versus-player (PvP) game. In both, there is the well-known tendency for player-killers (PKers) to hang out in newcomer (newbie) territories to prey on low-level characters who are easily killed. The game rules and regulations afford this sort of behavior (without necessarily condoning it) because there is really nothing to stop high-level “red” folks (avatars with red names that signify a high number of previous player kills) from hanging out in easy areas to repeatedly kill weaker ones. Such activities are, however, obviously discouraging to newcomers to the game and threaten the growth of the consumer base, because most beginners quickly lose interest in a game where they can hardly step outside the safety zone of the first town they appear in without getting killed over and over, themselves with nothing more than a lame dagger and a candle (items automatically added to new players’ inventory) to defend themselves. Obviously, this is problematic, for both the game company and the in-game community: A game company has a hard time surviving if no new players take the title up for regular subscription, and the in-game community has a difficulty surviving if there is no “new blood” coming in to replace the slow but steady trickle of those who leave. So, there emerges a tension between a common game practice (PKers hunting newbies), afforded by the game’s own design rules, and the game company and community’s needs for survival, which include bringing new players into the game. Actually, there are several issues this phenomenon raises, but I’ll stick with this fairly straightforward one for now.

What emerged in Lineage I, then, was a cultural practice of more powerful clans organizing PK hunting parties or solo escapades into the newbie territories to periodically clear it of all PKs. After all, the game design narrative was one of pseudo-medieval honor versus betrayal, so it was not beyond the purview of in-character play to dole out “justice” to perceived unjust grievors. Moreover, many of us who inhabited Lineage did, in fact, like PvP yet were bound by community norms, often enforced by clan rules, to not grieve people without due cause. In the clan that I led, I found that if I did not create contexts and scenarios in which members could engage in PvP gameplay, they would eventually do so randomly (because it’s fun), risking future clan wars and retaliation against our whole group. I either had to find suitable ways to direct the clan members’ natural PK urge or face the prospect of leading a clan renowned for out-of-character, random grief play. So, we followed the example of other clans on our server and established a rewards system for any members who policed newbie territories, which included not only medals of honor (that accumulate to determine in-clan rank) but also public accolades in the form of clan Web site-posted screenshots to document our “glorious kills” (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
LegendsOfAden Clan Web Site Inventory of “Glorious Kill” Screen Shots



Source: LegendsOfAden (2004).

So, what is the point of this small example? In effect, community norms, codified and enforced by many stable, long-running, and fairly high-level clans, balanced out what could be seen as an imbalance in game design. When Lineage II first launched, it took roughly 4 months for such practices to emerge. But emerge they did, again generating a kind of ecological balance between newbies, grievors, and clans in need of in-character ways to engage in PK without provoking clan wars. During those first 4 months or so before such practices emerged, new characters in Lineage II had a difficult time even leaving safety-zone cities given the abundance of newbie-killing PKers surrounding such towns. Once clans (and the occasional high-level solo hunter) began policing the areas out of their own PK propensities, the balance of red, chaotic PKers to blue, lawful ones in newbie territories more evenly matched that of other virtual areas in the game. The result was player-generated, community norms intersecting with game design rules, effectively balancing out an unfair disadvantage to newcomers entering an already populated PvP game. Did designed-in game rules afford such clan practices? Of course. Did they determine or predict them? No. This “interactively stabilized” system (Pickering, 1995) emerged from the mangle of both designed-in technologically instantiated rules and human intentions.

Lineage II “Chinese Farmers”

Let's take a more complex example of community norms that emerge at the intersection between game design and out-of-game economic and legal reality. Lineage II has servers in Korea, China, Taiwan, Japan, and North America and there is a significant crossover in which citizens play which servers. For example, members of my clan left Lineage I before the American release of Lineage II to covertly play the game on Asian servers, thereby mastering its mechanics long before the clan officially changed games (i.e., clan recon, a fairly common practice among clans looking to hop game titles). Likewise, some people from Asian countries play North American servers, for example, to game on a less densely populated server (Lineage I) or, more common these days, to work for real-world pay (on Lineage II). This latter practice, called *adena farming* (adena is the in-game currency of Lineage), which emerged during the game's open beta period, has met intense controversy here in the United States. Back in April 2004, the story broke on several discussion boards, Web sites, and blogs in the United States. For-profit companies in China were hiring people to play Lineage II for virtual currency in exchange for real-world pay. The practice continues largely unchecked today, and the attending controversy has nothing but intensified.

So, what exactly is it? Adena farming is where individuals are hired by a virtual-currency selling company (such as IGE) to spend long hours in-game collecting adena, which is then sold online through Web sites such as eBay. As best as I can piece together, Chinese adena farmers normally work 12-hour shifts (see Figure 2) with two people to each computer so that the in-game character they share is always online. Typically, they must collect 300,000 adena per shift in exchange for their daily wage of about US\$3. It may not sound like much, but compared to China's average yearly income of US\$316, it's rather lucrative work.

Adena farmers can currently be found throughout the in-game territories of Lineage II and are normally easy to recognize. They tend to game in groups, have characteristic avatar names such as “Boss001” and “Love001” through “Love009,” wear the top equipment in the game, and speak in a mix of Chinese and broken English. Adena farmers often declare—in both word and deed—whichever hunting area they currently occupy as their own property, ostensibly off limits to anyone else in the game. Should you challenge them on it, they will *kill-steal* you (attack the monsters you are hunting, thereby taking away from the experience points you gain), *drop-steal* you (pillage the monster you have successfully conquered, taking any goods or adena it happens to drop on the ground), heal whatever monsters you are hitting (making it nearly impossible to successfully hunt the monsters you came for), and if necessary, PK you. They are typically high level (from perpetually playing the avatars used), well equipped, difficult to communicate with (given the language barrier), and extremely, extremely efficient. After all, they are “on the clock,” so it's crucial they game as effectively as possible.

Figure 2
Web-Posted Picture, Purportedly of a Chinese Adena-Farming “Sweat Shop”



Source: Anonymous (2004).

Legal and Economic Issues

I have little expertise in legal and economic issues, but I'll try to highlight a few of the more obvious ones. First, there are the contradictory laws of various nations and companies. Whereas the Chinese government has sided with the players on the issue of ownership of virtual in-game goods, making it seemingly legal to trade them in exchange for real money, NCsoft's (2004) EULA expressly prohibits it:

NC Interactive has designed Lineage for play only as offered by NC Interactive at the Web Site. You agree to play Lineage only as offered by NC Interactive at the Web Site and not through any other means. You further agree not to create or provide any other means through which Lineage may be played by others, as through server emulators. You acknowledge that you do not have the right to create, publish, distribute, create derivative works from or use any software programs, utilities, applications, emulators or tools derived from or created for Lineage, except that you may use the Software to the extent expressly permitted by this Agreement. You may not take any action which imposes an unreasonable or disproportionately large load on our infrastructure. *You may not sell or auction any Lineage II accounts, characters, items, coin or copyrighted material.* (p. 7, italics added)

Yet, such trade continues to flourish, despite NCsoft's efforts to stop it (Russell, 2004):

NCsoft has since banned more than 200,000 players for buying and selling virtual goods, but the practice thrives. There are now more than 200 companies working the field, with total yearly revenue officially estimated at between \$83 million and \$415 million. The largest, ItemBay, has 1.5 million customers and as much as \$17 million in monthly revenues.

As Castronova (2004) points out, the economic implications are considerable, because the greatest purchasing power resides in America whereas the lowest wages reside in China:

In cyberspace, labor can move instantly from any one of Earth's economies into any other. More accurately, there isn't an American Labor Market and a Chinese Labor Market. There's just a Labor Market. The implications are occurring to more than a few people. . . . Wages will equilibrate.

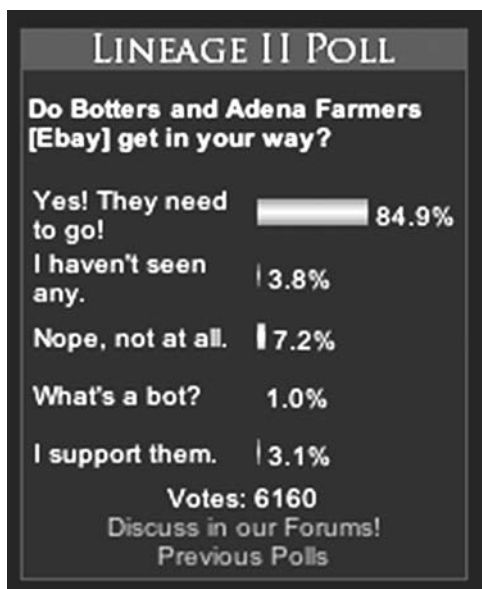
In effect, we have a new, virtually mediated form of off-shoring, a merging labor market, and a rather tempestuous collection of American Lineage II gamers who resent the effects that adena farming has had on their game (see Figure 3), despite the fact that they are, indeed, one of the driving forces behind it (see Figure 4).

Effect on Game Design

Adena farming has had a tangible effect on the original game design, most obvious (other than the loss of entire virtual territories, in the game, that is) in terms of the in-game economy and the way one character class in particular—dwarves—can now no longer function as originally designed. Many of the adena farmers play girl dwarves because dwarves are the only character class that can “spoil” monsters, which is to cast a particular, dwarf-only spell that increases the drop rate of monsters they kill, leading to more economically advantageous hunting. Why most choose *female* dwarves is unclear, although they are notably “kawaii,” perhaps playing into the Asian cuteness aesthetic (see Figure 5). Dwarves are a fighter class of avatar that specializes either in crafting higher level equipment unavailable from nonplayer characters, or NPCs (Artisan dwarves), or in gathering materials and parts from monsters for said crafting (Scavenger dwarves). The game was designed to give an economic advantage to dwarves of both types to compensate for the fact that their character statistics (such as strength and dexterity) render them slightly weaker than other character classes. Dwarves were supposed to be rich, as they are the sole resource for much higher level equipment.

The economy within Lineage II has yet to really stabilize. As the bulk of gamers graduate toward higher levels, the availability and demand of various levels of equipment fluctuate. However, the results of prolific adena farming within the game are already felt. What follows is what I have pieced together based on in-game observa-

Figure 3
Lineage II Warcry Poll, Querying Attitudes
Toward the Issue of Adena Farming



Source: Lineage II Warcry (2004).

tions, field notes, and an interview on the topic with a recognized expert Lineage II gamer named Gaveldor (pseudonym). By design, higher level dwarves cannot hunt monsters below a certain threshold with economic success as the game is designed such that too far below your own level yields few drops of any value (a game mechanic intended to keep higher level dwarves out of lower level areas so that younger dwarves have territories, more or less, of their own). Monsters in lower level areas tend to drop basic raw materials for crafting, such as animal bone, charcoal, and iron ore; monsters in higher level areas tend to drop more complex, highly valuable equipment/weapon parts for crafting high end gear. Raw materials that normally drop from lower level monsters are now regularly gathered by adena farmers who camp the areas and therefore are harder to come by than would be normally, assuming everyone had equal access. Meanwhile, higher end materials that normally drop (sometimes, "spoil only") from harder monsters go for less than expected prices, because adena farmers create a steady supply of them on the market, in exchange for the adena they most need. For the higher level dwarves, this effect on the in-game economy essentially removes their

Figure 4
Lineage II Orphus Poll, Querying How Many Players on the North American Servers Purchase In-Game Currency Through eBay



Source: Lineage II Orphus (2004a).

Figure 5
The Girl Dwarf of Lineage II



Source: NCsoft (2005).

intended economic advantage, because cheap materials are difficult to come by and expensive materials flood the market, leaving equipment crafted from them selling far below the costs incurred in making such goods in the first place. The consequence is this: Adena farming has affected the in-game economy in such a way that one entire character class, dwarves, is unable to do the one thing they were designed in particular for—make mad cash.

Effect on Game Play

Of course, adena farming hasn't just affected the game design, it has also motivated some rather peculiar forms of (now normative) game play. I'll try to highlight a few of the more dramatic ones. To return to the topic of dwarves, it's not just that the character class can no longer function as was originally intended, it's that they have now, in fact, become the most despised class of character throughout the entire game. Girl dwarves are now assumed to be adena farmers because fewer and fewer leisure gamers opt to play that class anymore (given the situation I just described), leaving an increasing percentage of those remaining as adena farmers. In essence, there is now an unfortunate feedback loop such that, because other players assume all girl dwarves to be farmers, only the farmers care to play them. Girl dwarfs are now reviled by many players, systematically harassed, and unable to find anyone that will allow them to hunt in their groups, unless of course someone already knows the "person" beneath the "pigtails." In a way, it seems as if a whole new form of virtual racism has emerged, with an in-game character class unreflectively substituted for unacknowledged (and largely unexamined) real-world differences between China and America, such as economic disparity, cultural difference, language barriers, and discrepant play styles.

Moreover, prolific adena farming has also motivated nonfarmers to forgo the usual between-clan competitions that, in Lineage I, created a rich political community of varying factions and alliances vying for castle control. Instead, folks are joining forces in a sort of "us versus them" mentality to wage perpetual field war against all (perceived) Chinese. In other words, the one game mechanic that made Lineage unique—clan sieges for castle control—has been substituted by a game mechanic of quite a different sort: farmer farming. Consider, for example, the recently Web-posted game video entitled *Farm the Farmers Day II* (finalElf, n.d.) that documents one of several "extermination" efforts occurring in-game (see Figure 6). In it, several "legitimate" gamers, including the video's creator (a renowned gamer named finalElf), clear a particularly overfarmed virtual territory called Cruma Tower of its Chinese adena farmers. The video ends with a plea to other nonfarming gamers, urging them to join forces in the effort to remove this adena farming "cancer" from the game (finalElf, n.d.):

Farmers are no longer scattered groups of untagged dwarves and daggers farming low level areas. They are now an extremely organized and high level force that protects the

Figure 6
Screen shots From the Fan-Generated Digital
In-Game Movie Entitled *Farm the Farmers Day II*



Source: finalElf (n.d.).

lower levels. They participate in and manipulate the politics of the server in their best interests. . . . Every legitimate player in this game needs to recognize that farmers are a cancer that will eventually kill Lineage 2. Whatever hatreds that stood between legitimate clans . . . need to be put aside until we rid ourselves of the plague that is killing this game. . . . We may not be able to stop all the farmers, but we CAN prevent them from becoming so powerful that they control the game.

I must admit that I do admire the coordinated and collaborative efforts the game community has made in response to what they see as a genuine threat to the game's integrity. This is, after all, what I mean by "interactively stabilized game balance" based in no small part on the emergent community practices of those who actually inhabit a given designed game space. It is disturbing, however, that it is fueling a longstanding animosity between Asians and Americans within the game. There is a history of discrepant game play in Lineage that unfortunately falls along ethnic lines, and the fact that the two populations have a hard time communicating across a real language barrier surely doesn't help. At this point in time, calling someone "Chinese" is a general insult that seems aimed more at one's style of play than one's real-world ethnicity. There is reason to be concerned here, although my hunch is that most people in the game try not to let this go too far. For example, consider the following exchange that happened to occur in the group I had been hunting with in the very same location and on the same evening that the fan video described previously (see Figure 6) was filmed:

The group is hunting in Cruma Tower. A nongrouped member, who I call KSer (for "kill-stealer"), starts stealing monsters that are spawning in the room.

Figure 7
Lineage II Orphus Poll, Querying Players on the North American Servers as to Whether It Is Okay to Hate Chinese Players



Source: Lineage II Orphus (2004b).

GroupMember1: don't kill, plz
 KSer: shut up
 KSer: you stupid chinese
 KSer: get a real job
 GroupMember2: oO [raised eyebrow emoticon]
 KSer: stupid — [word censored by game system]
 GroupMember3: who is chinese?
 GroupMember3: im american as the Ford mustang :)
 GroupMember4: Im American as the Honda Accord?
 GroupMember3: lol
 GroupMember3: so your mix breed
 GroupMember2: Im' as American as Hockey
 GroupMember4: not really. but the Celts dont make many cars.

In this exchange, an evocation of ethnicity is met with playful commentary that tacitly signals that the practice of calling someone “Chinese” as a form of insult is (more than) a bit absurd. Other data seem to support this conclusion. For example, in a recent Lineage II fansite poll, the community took its own temperature, so to speak, on the issue, with results suggesting that indeed this conclusion—that Lineage II gamers do maintain a distinction between “Chinese” as an actual ethnicity and “Chinese” as a moniker for a particular play style—is more or less correct (see Figure 7).

Overall, the Lineage II community is pretty vexed on this “Chinese adena farming” issue, although whether it will necessarily ruin the game (as players fear) remains to be seen. As Gaveldor commented,

[Adena farming] has a lot of potential, not necessarily to completely break the game but enough to put people off from playing it. After the first month of retail, a lot of people from beta quit. They were pissed because they can’t hunt where they want to, and they can’t compete with higher end people who are paying for items. It’s not fun.

Concluding Comments

By the time this short essay is circulated, the practices I have described will have evolved and changed and the descriptions I’ve given will no longer be accurate or complete. This fact, however, only further supports my point: The ways in which a game gets played out on the ground level are not easily determined *a priori* by the game design, rules, EULAs, or whatnot. They shift and evolve, often in unpredictable directions, seemingly holding still only when the “mangle” of designers’ intentions (instantiated in the game’s rules), players’ goals and agency (instantiated in shared, emergent practices), and broader economic, legal, and cultural issues reach a (temporary) point of stabilization. Pickering’s (1995) view of science as “an evolving field of human and material agencies reciprocally engaged in a play of resistance and accommodation where the former seeks to capture the latter” (p. 23) applies equally to the domain of MMOGs, with one notable exception. In MMOGs, there are two sets of agency in conversation with one another: designers on one hand, and players who inhabit their designs on the other. This conversation is often framed as a contentious one of competition between the two parties. As Koster (2005) states, “Game designers are caught in the Red Queen’s Race because challenges are meant to be surmounted” (p. 126).² If this characterization is correct, then designers are not the only ones constantly running. Gamer communities are also necessarily in a perpetual state of development to maintain their fitness relative to the systems they coevolve with (cf. Van Valen, 1973)—game designs and redesigns, economic realities, legal regulation, and even the emerging global technologies and practices that make up the broader online world, to name a few. This is why we need to understand the emergent game cultures within virtual worlds and not simply the designed objects that hit the shelves. This is also why we might consider the legal regulation of games as not merely a matter of intellectual property rights (or the whole host of other legal issues that arise in the context of the Internet) but also perhaps as the philosophical and ethical issue of self-governance of societies that inhabit virtual kingdoms that are corporate owned but player constituted.

Notes

1. I might also acknowledge that there may be a problem related to gender. Game design and research tend to be dominated by men, and traditionally male-dominated discussions tend to value the technical over the social. I am avoiding this argument, however, as a mere cursory treatment of it runs the risk of essentializing both gender types.

2. As the Red Queen tells Alice in Lewis Carroll's (1899) classic story, "Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!"

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